

A little perspective on secrets of success

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You know what it's like: You spent weeks studying for that big exam and you know the material like the back of your hand. And when the exam begins, with adrenalin coursing through your veins, you suddenly forget everything you learned, and even how to think, and there is no way you are going to achieve the result you should.

If you're lucky, you also know what this is like: You spent weeks studying for that big exam and you know the material like the back of your hand. And when the exam begins, with adrenalin coursing through your veins, everything suddenly becomes crystal clear, and your success is all but assured.

While most people have experienced both of the above scenarios, few understand why they sometimes experience one and sometimes the other. And that's unfortunate given that the difference between the two has the potential to dictate success or failure.

And that's why Sian Beilock is here. An associate psychology professor at the University of Chicago and author of *Choke: What the Secrets of the Brain Reveal About Getting it Right When You Have To*, Beilock makes it her business to study why talented people sometimes perform poorly.

In her most recent experiment, Beilock investigated the differences between good and poor performances on a math test. Specifically, she and her team tested the level of cortisol in 73 undergraduate students both before and after they took a stressful math test. (Like adrenalin, cortisol is a stress hormone.)

Interestingly, Beilock found that cortisol and test performance were both positively and negatively correlated — in other words, as cortisol levels increased, some students did better and others worse. And this means that the presence of cortisol itself is not the problem — or the solution — but that it can be a problem or a solution depending on how students perceive their own physiological response.

Beilock explains it this way: "If a student interprets their physiological response as a sign they are about to fail, they will. And, when taking a math test, students anxious about math are likely to do this. But the same physiological response can also be linked to success if a student's outlook is positive."

As with much else in life, it all comes down to one's perspective. That means that fear of failure really can be a self-fulfilling prophesy, but it of course raises the question of how one can overcome fear of failure and use one's stress hormones to their full advantage.

Fortunately, Beilock has studied that too, and she recommends that students change their perspective by thinking about past success before writing exams or, alternatively, writing about their anxieties beforehand and consequently "off-loading" their fears.

These sound simple, but apparently they work. And with the new school year less than a month away, simple solutions to difficult problems are always welcome.

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